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ABSTRACT

Information literacy, or the ability to seek and effectively utilize information resources, has become a critical tool in the Information Age. Community colleges, as gateways to higher education, have an important role in equipping students with this ability to access and utilize information. The increasing importance of information skills has brought change to college campuses, as librarians have moved out of their roles as custodians of information to become primary instructors of research and critical thinking skills. An abundance of resource materials has also emerged to help librarians and faculty teach these essential tools. One recently developed aid is the Information Literacy: Search Strategies, Tools & Resources (ST&R) program. Designed to enable students to become self-sustained seekers and users of information sources and digital libraries, the program takes a user-centered perspective and focuses on the intellectual aspects of locating, evaluating, interpreting, and communicating information. The program offers exercises, glossaries, and other resources related to information use, and allows students to connect automatically to electronic resources for practice. Finally, ST&R is flexible, makes use of research from wide-ranging fields, and is scalable to adapt to students with varying academic abilities. (Contains 11 references.) (BCY)

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Office of Educational Research and Improvement

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Digest

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Information Literacy: Search Strategies, Tools & Resources

by Zorana Ercegovac and Erika Yamasaki

In the current Information Age, the speed at which we work makes us increasingly dependent on high-quality, accurate information. However, information is becoming more voluminous, fragmented into different formats and media, and duplicated in multiple physical locations. In order to access and use these myriad sources effectively, people must be information literate.

As defined by the American Library Association (ALA) in its mission statement for the global information society, 21st century information literacy is the ability to seek and effectively utilize information resources, including knowledge of how to use technologies and the forms in which information is stored (ALA, 1998). This means that asking a good question, as well as accessing, locating, evaluating, and using information, is critical not only in scholarly activities but in making daily decisions.

Having accurate, up-to-date information determines the difference between the rich and the poor in the Information Age. Community colleges can make a vital contribution toward closing this gap by equipping their students with the ability to access, retrieve, and utilize information.

As we strive to understand information literacy issues in a more holistic manner, the Information Literacy: Search Strategies, Tools & Resources (ST&R) Program developed by Ercegovac (1997a) can provide invaluable guidance in a variety of information literacy environments.

This Digest briefly describes challenges facing information literacy development as well as ST&R and its usefulness to community college faculty and students.

Information Technology

The growth of computer networks and information services has already enabled learners at all levels to share resources, collaborate with one another, and publish their results electronically. To use information sources effectively, we need both technology infrastructure (TI) and information literacy infrastructure (ILI) in place. While TI has been well-funded and developed, ILI is poorly applied in teaching and learning, and requires educators' attention.

Information technology is a tool for writing papers, communicating with colleagues worldwide, and exchanging experiments, ideas, and programs internationally. As community colleges are considering distance learning and adding new technologies to their curriculum, ensuring students' information literacy becomes vital. However, this shift may challenge existing campus dynamics.

A Current Challenge

The proliferation of information sources and educational technology have created a dysfunctional relationship between community college faculty and librarians that is based on an outdated teaching/learning paradigm (Tompkins, 1996). Traditionally, teaching has been the purview of faculty while librarians were viewed as merely custodians of printed information resources. In the current Information Age however, librarians have become the primary instructors in community colleges to teach research methods and critical thinking skills as applied to information access (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 1996). As such, there is increasing support for community college librarians to be seen as key instructional team members and as partners with faculty (Tompkins, 1996; McHenry, Stewart & Wu, 1992).

Especially as libraries are transformed into integrated library/high technology centers, resource-based learning (i.e., drawing on resources beyond textbooks and lectures) and information literacy can be adopted as goals across academic disciplines. At Central Seattle Community College, for example, faculty linked an English composition course with one in library science to teach students how to use information literacy skills in the context of cultural pluralism (McHenry, Stewart & Wu, 1992). By working together, librarians and faculty were able to teach content as well as the valuable skill of navigating through complex data bases and information resources.

While faculty may know how to teach English composition or other standard courses, they may not be as comfortable teaching information literacy. Fortunately, an abundance of resources has emerged from sources including the Department of Education (1996), the ERIC Clearinghouse on Information and Technology (Eisenberg & Johnson, 1996) and independent authors (for example see Mendrinos, 1994). These publications state information literacy goals, review literacy tools, provide case studies, and present adaptable models of information literacy curricula.

The ST&R Program

One recently developed aid is the Information Literacy: Search Strategies, Tools & Resources (ST&R) Program that can be tailored to the local needs of colleges. It is comprised of three integrated instructional components: the ST&R book, a PowerPoint presentation for classroom use, and an HTML version of the book for installation on institutional servers.

Implemented at the intersection of learners and Web-ready information resources, ST&R can initiate students to the world of information literacy. It is a comprehensive and flexible tool that has been developed to enable students

to become self-sustained seekers and users of information sources and digital libraries. This can be especially useful in the community colleges where many students are from disadvantaged or lower socio-economic backgrounds and previously may not have had access to such sources.

The program has been designed for anyone interested in the critical and effective use of all types of information sources regardless of their format (e.g., books, journal articles, manuscripts, log diaries, visual elements, and other artifacts) and medium (e.g., printed, electronic, and networked digital libraries). ST&R takes a user-centered perspective and focuses on the intellectual aspects of locating, evaluating, interpreting, and communicating information sources rather than on the technical aspects of these activities.

Furthermore, ST&R is comprehensive because it contains references to a variety of sources and digital repositories, introduces effective search strategies and tools for the use of these sources, and covers critical evaluation of these sources. In this one-stop "literacy mall," ST&R also offers exercises, a glossary of introduced terms and concepts, and Internet addresses of numerous sources available on the Web. In particular, the electronic version of ST&R allows students to connect automatically with Internet addresses and explore various search engines in an orderly and guided manner. Instructors are equipped with the "ST&R Show," based on the Microsoft PowerPoint 97 presentation program, that features links to selected Internet digital libraries and resources.

The ST&R Program also is flexible because its content is divided into a series of nine interrelated yet independent chapters. Students can expand each chapter by doing more exercises and searches, tracking new Web addresses, updating the existing ones, and developing their own portfolio of annotated information sources.

This program is the first attempt to translate research from the fields of information seeking, information retrieval, and educational psychology into a practical information literacy program. It can be utilized in a variety of academic settings including libraries, media centers, and classrooms. In addition, different academic departments may wish to incorporate individual parts of ST&R into their curricula to fit their own information literacy mission, students, and collections. Also, the program is scalable to the different academic abilities of community college students.

In summary, ST&R represents an accumulation of over 10 years of teaching, in-class testing with undergraduates at the University of California, Los Angeles, and feedback from real learners and users. It is based on understanding the user, active learning, a conceptual approach in teaching, and modularity (Ercegovac, 1995, 1997b). While the program is a very practical information literacy tool, it also is based on solid research and conceptual foundations. For example, it recognizes the importance of the information life cycle (e.g., information need, search and interpretation, evaluation, and use) as well as the user (National Academy of Sciences, 1998).

Conclusion

In this Information Age, we browse and query the world's repositories without ever having to leave our workplaces and communities. Thus, it is not surprising that the traditional sense of a library as a confined space with local dimensions has introduced ambiguities to the way people interpret library collections and uses. As a result, the value of a library as a store has been questioned, and the library's role as a service is largely misunderstood.

Another concern is the ease with which untrained users can directly search sources, resulting in their continued difficulty with utilizing information retrieval systems. Furthermore, definitions of access and information are not agreed upon universally.

All these changes have created the need to rethink information literacy and to educate students in the lifelong quest for knowledge. ST&R helps in this regard.

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